

IS JESUS FOR REAL?

by Ray C. Stedman

More than nineteen hundred years ago there was a Man born contrary to the laws of life. This Man lived in poverty and was reared in obscurity. He did not travel extensively. Only once did He cross the boundary of the country in which He lived; that was during His exile in childhood.

He possessed neither wealth nor influence. His relatives were inconspicuous, and had neither training nor formal education.

In infancy He startled a king; in childhood He puzzled doctors; in manhood He ruled the course of nature, walked upon the billows as if pavements, and hushed the sea to sleep.

He healed the multitudes without medicine and made no charge for His service.

He never wrote a book, and yet all the libraries of the country could not hold the books that have been written about Him.

He never wrote a song, and yet He has furnished the theme for more songs than all the songwriters combined.

He never founded a college, but all the schools put together cannot boast of having so many students.

He never marshalled an army, nor drafted a soldier, nor fired a gun; and yet no leader ever had more volunteers who have, under His orders, made more rebels stack arms and surrender without a shot fired.

He never practiced psychiatry, and yet He has healed more broken hearts than all the doctors far and near.

Once each week the wheels of commerce cease their turning and multitudes wend their way to worshipping assemblies to pay homage and respect to Him.

The names of the past proud statesmen of Greece and Rome have come and gone. The names of the past scientists, philosophers, and theologians have come and gone; but the name of this Man abounds more and more. Though time has spread nineteen hundred years between the people of this generation and the scene of His crucifixion, yet He still lives! Herod could not destroy Him, and the grave could not hold Him.

He stands forth upon the highest pinnacle of heavenly glory, proclaimed of God, acknowledged by angels, adored by saints, and feared by devils, as the living, personal Christ, our Lord and Saviour!

The greatest wonder of all, perhaps, is that while he was alive his own family did not believe him and his own nation opposed him to the death.

We come in our study in the Gospel of John to the section that deals with the unbelief of the brothers of Jesus, and the hostility of the nation toward him. John gives the background of this in these words in chapter seven.

After this Jesus went about in Galilee; he would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill him. Now the Jews' feast of Tabernacles was at hand. So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." For even his brothers did not believe in him. {John 7:1-5 RSV}

This occurred six months after the feeding of the five thousand, and the great discourse on the "bread of life" that our Lord gave in the synagogue at Capernaum. If you would like to know some of the events that took place in that intervening six months period you can read them in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, because they trace more of the Galilean ministry of Jesus and fill in some of the gaps that the gospel of John

leaps over.

The closing words of chapter six clearly show that a turning point has occurred in our Lord's ministry. Many of the great multitudes -- even many of his own disciples who followed him everywhere he went -- have now drawn back and ceased to follow him. In the opening words of chapter seven, John declares that there is a hint of murder in the air. Our Lord is aware of growing hostility against him and that the Jews in Judea are seeking a way to kill him.

The Feast of Tabernacles was now at hand. This great feast of Israel occurred in early October. Originally it was seven days in length, but later one more day was added (called in this chapter "the great day of the feast"). During this time the inhabitants of Jerusalem built booths out of tree limbs and boughs which they thatched over, and families actually moved out of their houses and lived in them. This was to remind them that for forty years they wandered as pilgrims in the wilderness and lived in tents.

It is interesting that this feast has, in the last couple of years, become a source of interest to the Gentiles who believe in Israel's heritage and they are invited to come to Jerusalem and join in the celebration.

When this feast drew near the four brothers of Jesus came to him. One of the gospels tells us their names: James and Jude (who, after they came to faith, were to write two of the letters of the New Testament), and Joses and Simon. (Jesus also had sisters, but their names are not given in the New Testament.) These four brothers came as a kind of self-appointed Political Action Committee, giving advice to Jesus. Their four-fold advice could be repeated for every political candidate in this election year:

- First, they told him, in effect, "You need a larger arena. Galilee is too small for you. Why stay here in the sticks? You need to get down to Judea, to Jerusalem. That's the capital, the heart of the country."
- "Furthermore," they advised Jesus, "Your Judean disciples need to see you again. Their faith needs to be supported and reinforced by witnessing miracles like the ones you have been doing up here." Remember that John's gospel opens with Jesus' ministry in Judea. There he won a great multitude of disciples. Some of them, of course, followed him to Galilee, but it is likely that a great many did not have any contact with him for months. Thus Jesus' brothers suggest that he needs to reinforce those ties and show them his powers.
- Thirdly, they suggested that his game plan was quite unrealistic. They said, "No man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly." By that they meant, "If you want to be recognized as the Messiah, you have got to move out into the open where people can see what you are doing. It's a mistake to work in an obscure corner of the nation like Galilee. You need to change your plan if you want to reach the nation."
- Finally, they suggested that his gifts were being wasted: "If you do these things, show yourself to the world." Obviously they could not deny the miraculous powers he possessed. They had seen his miracles and must have been greatly astonished by them because he did nothing like this as he was growing up with them in Nazareth. Thus they told him, "Since you can do these things you can't hide them here in Galilee. You've got to show this to the whole world."

That kind of reasoning is very widespread today. It sounds natural and normal, and it has much of common sense about it. The same kind of argument is heard in many churches today. Faced with the command of Jesus to witness to and reach the whole world in our generation, certain churches and Christian organizations say, "We have got to go about this in a systematic, businesslike way. We must first survey the need and find out how many people are interested. Then let's estimate the cost and come up with an approach that will enlist as many people as possible into this program. Then we will launch a huge publicity campaign to get the news out of what we are trying to do so that we can pay for it all. Finally, let's carry out the plan and reap the results." Such approaches are heard on many sides today. They sound good, they make good sense, as the arguments of the brothers of Jesus made good sense in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world around.

But there is one missing element, which John records in Verse 5: "For even his brothers did not believe in

him." If you had asked these men, "Is Jesus a great brother to you?" they would have said, "Yes, he is. We love him, although we never can quite understand him. But he is always compassionate, merciful, kind and trustworthy. He is a great brother." And if you had asked them, "Did Jesus have unusual powers?" they would have said, "Not while he was growing up, but we can't deny his mysterious abilities to do remarkable things now. He does have great powers." But if you had asked them, "Do you believe he is the promised Messiah?" they would have had to say, "No, we don't. We can't accept that. It's impossible to believe that this man whom we grew up with -- we slept in the same bedroom with him, we went to school with him, we did all the things boys do together -- that this is the one the Scriptures are talking about. We can't believe that."

That is why his brothers argued the way they did. If they had accepted that he was the Messiah, it would have changed everything. They believed that he was but one of them -- a Jewish believer -- but they did not see him as anything more.

Somebody told me last week that there are three ways you can tell that Jesus was Jewish: First, because he worked for his father. Second, because he stayed home until he was thirty. And, third, because his mother thought he was God!

That may have been true of his mother, but it was not true of his brothers. They did not see him as any different than themselves. While his miraculous powers must have amazed and astonished them, and they could not figure him out, yet they did not accept his claims to be the Messiah. That is the meaning of these words, "his brothers did not believe in him."

Had they accepted that, they would have realized that God had already outlined a complete program of how the Messiah was going to achieve his objectives. They could have read it in Isaiah and in other prophets. All through the Old Testament there was predicted a carefully outlined program, including his suffering and death, that the Messiah had to follow. If they had read that they would never have come up with the advice which they offered Jesus.

The church has the same problem yet today. We do not believe that God knows, and has said, how his church is to function. We hear his goals for the church, and we conclude that it is up to us to try to work them out as best we can, and so we fall into the trap of thinking we have to utilize all the busy approaches of the world. We have difficulty understanding that God has already told the church how to work and has outlined those directions plainly in the Scriptures: To discover, each one, the spiritual gifts God has given us, to utilize the spiritual resources that are provided to us in the presence of Jesus himself in our hearts by the Spirit, and then to do what is right before us in our neighborhoods, in our homes, in our families, wherever we are. That is the way the church is to accomplish its work. Instead we think we must organize great programs, with tremendous publicity campaigns, etc. Thus we fall into the same trap as these brothers of Jesus.

In England, recently, I saw how the church has neglected what the Word of God tells the church to do, and instead persists in using artificial, mechanical methods, borrowed from the world. As I traveled about, speaking to leaders of churches in various places, my theme was basically the old proverb, "When all else fails, follow directions!" That is what they need to do and that is what we need to do. Had these brothers of Jesus understood who he was, and believed it, they would never have suggested that he do what they asked him to do.

In response, Jesus describes the difference between them and him. This is really the difference between God's way and man's ways:

"My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil. Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come." So saying, he remained in Galilee. {John 7:6-9 RSV}

In the words, "My time is not yet here, but your time is always here," Jesus means that it was not yet the appointed hour for him to give himself as the Messiah for the sins of the nation. The Feast of Tabernacles was the wrong feast. He is saying, in effect, to his brothers, "You're asking me to go up to the Feast of

Tabernacles and make it known to everybody that I am the Messiah by the appointed path that God has chosen, but if I did that it would be at the wrong time: It would never work."

Jesus understood the Scriptures. He knew that God had appointed, not only a pathway for the Messiah to follow, but the very program and time in which the events would occur. He knew that he would not be offered at the Feast of Tabernacles, but at the Feast of Passover. Tabernacles is in October, while Passover is in March or April, thus there were six months left before his time was to come. He knew the ceremony in the book of Exodus of the offering of a lamb and sprinkling its blood over the doorposts so that the Angel of Death would pass over the houses of Israelites and spare them from the judgment of God, was picturing that event in which he would be the central character. This is why John the Baptist's first words when he saw Jesus coming toward him were, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world," {cf, John 1:29}. John and Jesus both understood the program but the brothers of Jesus did not. It must have been a heartache to Jesus that his family did not understand and did not believe in him. There is nothing more hurtful than to be misunderstood by those closest to you, and yet this is what our Lord had to live with all the time.

When he said, "But your time is always here," he meant that if his brothers went up to the feast they would only be fulfilling what everybody expected of them. They would be acting as normal religious Jews, fulfilling a religious duty which would not irritate anybody, raise any questions, or challenge any beliefs. Therefore, they could act without fear of arousing antagonism or opposition. That is why he says, "'The world cannot hate you' -- because you are living according to the way it thinks; you are not raising any questions; you are not challenging anything; 'but it hates me,' because when I speak I expose the hearts of men; I call evil by the right names; I speak the truth that causes people to wince and they don't like that. They hate me because I tell them the truth."

This is surely why our modern world loves euphemisms, polite ways of describing ugly or sinful things. We change the label on the bottle of poison and think we have changed the power of the poison.

I read the other day of a businessman who frequently came home so worn out that he was in a grouchy mood, and his family accused him of being grouchy every time he came home. But then he got a raise in pay, which they all appreciated, and when he came home grouchy and upset they called it instead, "executive tension." But that is merely a euphemism for grouchiness!

That is why drunkards want to be called alcoholics; they do not like to be called drunkards.

Harlots want to be known as businesswomen; rich snobs like to be called the upper classes.

But Jesus will not play games like that. He came to tell men the truth and in doing so he aroused the instinctive antagonism of the heart that wants to cover evil over.

You can see this in many ways today. Tourist brochures describing the Bay Area never talk about the slums, the crime, the drug traffic, the prostitution and the ugly, seamy side of life here. Rather, they describe this area in terms of such beauty, culture, refinement, and loveliness that everybody wants to come here. Visitors do find some of that, but not nearly as much as they would hope to find. With it comes the seamy side as well.

Yes, we kid ourselves. But Jesus would not do that and that is why the world hated him.

Thus he says to his brothers, "You go. I'm staying awhile." Some have accused him of lying to them. But if you will notice in the margin it says the word "yet" is included in many ancient manuscripts: "I am not yet going up to the feast for my time is not yet fully come." Read that way, he is not in any sense telling them he is not going, rather he is saying, "Not yet; not for awhile." Thus we read in verse 10:

But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. {John 7:10 RSV}

Now we learn why Jesus did not want to go: He did not want to take his disciples or his brothers to the feast because that would have attracted attention to him, so he sent his brothers on ahead (and probably with them

his disciples, because they seem to show up later on in Jerusalem). But he himself went up alone, incognito, as it were, so as not to draw attention to himself.

He found Jerusalem agog with rumors about him. In the intervening months he had become the sensation of the nation. Reports of his great miracles had filtered down to Jerusalem and everybody was talking about him, as John describes:

The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, "Where is he?" And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, "He is a good man," others said, "No, he is leading the people astray." Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him. {John 7:11-13 RSV}

Those words capture the atmosphere of the feast. Notice the polarization of the crowd. This goes on in every generation. Any great issue that becomes public knowledge tends to polarize. There were those who said of him, "'He is a good man.' Why, he healed my Aunt Beth. He opened the eyes of a blind man that I knew. He goes about doing these wonderful things, restoring the deaf, making the lame to walk, saying marvelous words and explaining life to us. Look at all the great things he has done. He is a good man."

But others said, "That is not the whole story. Have you heard what the leaders are saying about him? He teaches men to break the Law of Moses by violating the Sabbath. Do you think that is a good man? We are warned in the Scriptures that if a man doesn't follow what the Law says, don't believe him." Thus they spread the word that he was a deceiver. Yet no one talked openly. That is a note to catch here. The Gestapo were everywhere, everyone was afraid of being hauled up before the leaders, so they did not speak openly but merely whispered about him.

We learn, in this next section, why Jesus eventually went up to the feast. It was not to appear publicly as the Messiah (because he knew this was the wrong time), but it was an opportunity again to teach the crowds the truth and invite men and women to himself.

So John writes,

About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. The Jews marveled at it, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood." {John 7:14-18 RSV}

What a marvelous teacher Jesus must have been! How many times I have wished I could have heard his words as he spoke so insightfully and so powerfully that even his enemies marveled at his ability! Here is revealed the authority of Jesus: He did not speak like the other teachers of Israel. The text reads, "How is it this man has learning?" but actually it literally says, "How does this man know his letters so well?" The "letters" refer to the Scriptures. What Jesus was doing was teaching from the Scriptures. He was taking these ancient prophecies and other passages and expounding them and explaining them. But he did not do it like the rabbis did. In that day (and this is true still today), every Jewish rabbi began his teaching with words such as, "the sages say," or, "the Talmud teaches," or, "the Mishnah explains so and so." But Jesus never quoted an authority other than the Scriptures. He would say, as we have repeatedly recorded here in John's gospel, "Truly, truly, I say unto you..." When he talked like that, people listened. They were captured by what he said.

I have often said that the most common response of people listening to Jesus as he was teaching was probably something like, "Yes, that's right, isn't it? Yes, that's what I've always felt," because what he said was confirmed by life and by experience. It had about it what J. B. Phillips calls "the ring of truth," that deep, almost intuitive conviction that what he said was reality, the way things really are. When people wondered among themselves where he learned this (because he was not a graduate of any rabbinical college and had not sat under the great teachers), they fell into the trap that many people fall into today; that one has to go to school in order to learn, and the only way one can ever be qualified to preach or to teach is to graduate from a

seminary. But, from time to time, God deliberately sets that aside and raises up somebody like D. L. Moody, who murders the King's English, or a George Washington Carver, who was born in slavery. Moody, who only attended school to the third grade, began his message to the students of Cambridge University with the sentence, "Young gentlemen, don't ever think God don't love you, for he do."

But when people asked Jesus to reveal the origin of his teaching he told them: "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me." Note that he was not even claiming to be a self-made man. Many people who have not gone to school still are proud of their knowledge. They say, "I taught myself. I studied, and worked, and I taught myself." There is much pride lurking beneath that. Someone has said that Englishmen are self-made men who worship their creator! That may be true, I do not know. But Jesus does not say that. "I am not even self-taught. My teaching is from him who sent me," he declares.

There is a beautiful passage in the fiftieth chapter of Isaiah, where the prophet predicts the very words of the Messiah:

**The Lord has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him that is weary.
Morning by morning he wakens,
he wakens my ear
to hear as a disciple. {cf, Isa 50:4}**

That is the source of the teaching that understands life and is in full accord with reality.

I received a letter from a great friend of mine the other day. Writing about preachers, he said, "I want to hear a man who knows God and has seen him recently. I don't want to listen to his press agent."

That is how most people feel: They want to hear from somebody who has been taught of God.

Then in Verse 17, one of the most remarkable verses in his teaching, Jesus gives the key to understanding his words: "If any man's will is to do his will (God's will), he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority."

Do you often wonder if Jesus actually was what he claimed to be?

Do you have trouble at times understanding what he is saying in these tremendous passages, especially in the Gospel of John?

Well, if that is the case, he tells you what to do: Practice what he says. Obey his words. Repent of your sins. Come to him. Cast yourself upon his mercy. Believe in his forgiveness, and go out and treat people the way he says to. Then you will know from an inside knowledge that no one can take away that what he says is true, because his teaching is in line with reality.

This is a principle that runs all through life: You learn by doing. A doctor may learn all that the medical books can teach him, but until he gets his hands into surgery or dispenses medicines to people who are sick he never really learns. The same is true in any field: You learn by doing. When you do what Jesus says, you begin to understand with a deep conviction that he knows what life is all about.

This explains the phenomenon of certain people who become Christians -- some of them early, some late in life -- who immediately practice what they have learned and grow with astonishing rapidity. They become grown up, capable, well-adjusted, whole persons, seemingly almost overnight, while others who sit under the teaching of the Scripture for years hardly seem to grow at all; they are still childlike in their behavior, emotionally upset, anxious, and fear-ridden. Why is this? It is because they are not doing what they hear. Those who put into practice the truth they hear begin to grow immediately.

In Washington, D. C. years ago, I met a hard-bitten old Marine General, one of those tough, self-sufficient characters who was used to giving orders. After he had retired he became a Christian and grew with astonishing rapidity. Everyone who knew him saw the change. They respected him as much as they always had, but they saw a compassion, an understanding, a patience develop in him that was never there before. He was able to get along with people with whom he had formerly been bitterly at odds. When I asked one of the Christian leaders why this was true, he replied: "When General Silverthorn hears something from the Scripture, he obeys it immediately." That is why he grew so fast.

We had here in this area a principal of a high school who had had no exposure to evangelical faith. But then he became a Christian and began to grow and within weeks he was teaching the Word to others. He has since moved away, but he has a great ministry in which he is teaching men constantly. One day I counted more than seventy men whom he has personally reached in his area, and taught how to grow up as people, and be what God wants them to be. The reason behind his growth was because he obeyed what he learned.

Yet some people who have been exposed to the gospel for years and years never seem to grow. After years of sitting under the ministry of the Scriptures they still think an epistle is the wife of an apostle! I am grateful for the many people in this congregation who put into practice what they learn. How encouraging to see how quickly you grow and become strong so that you are able to stand and work out the problems and difficulties of life.

Verse 18 reveals the mark of an authentic learner: "He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood." That was true, of course, of Jesus. He did not seek his own glory. He did not care whether he spoke to one person or a great crowd in the courts of the temple. What he said was always true and always compassionate, and he did not care whether anybody praised him or not. I have learned that if somebody is obviously seeking a reputation as a Bible teacher, and seeing to it that he is recognized and publicized, that much of what he says is fraudulent. Such people may teach much that is true, but their hearts are wrong, so that, although what they say is true, it will come without much power -- it does not accomplish much. But if they are intent on the message, if they are careless of publicity, if they seek to get across what God has said so that people might be delivered from their sins, you can trust that kind of teacher.

In the next paragraph we see a wonderful example of our Lord's skill in public debate.

"Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?" The people answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?" {John 7:19-20 RSV}

This interaction, of course, is based on Jesus' healing of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. The leaders of the Jews were accusing Jesus of being a lawbreaker because he did that. Jesus' argument is, "Why are you so hostile to me? Why are you seeking to murder me? You break the Law as much as you accuse me of doing." The crowd interrupts, "Wait a minute. What are you talking about?" They are obviously ignorant of the intrigue of their leaders and the plots to destroy Jesus. So, in ignorance and innocence, they cry out and say, "You're a madman. What are you talking about? Nobody is seeking to kill you." But knowing the intent of the leaders, Jesus goes on to say,

"I did one deed, and you all marvel at it. Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man upon the sabbath. If on the sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the sabbath I made a man's whole body well'?" {John 7:21-23 RSV}

Here is Jesus' powerful argument: "I made a man well on the Sabbath and the crowd rejoiced in that. But in obedience to the Law of Moses your leaders circumcise boys on the Sabbath day." The Law required that circumcision must take place on the eighth day after birth. On many occasions that day would, of course, fall on a Sabbath, but the Law said that the boy was to be circumcised anyway because circumcision was a more important rite. But circumcision is a form of mutilation of the body. Granted it has a moral significance, but it

is a mutilation of the flesh, a cutting off of part of the foreskin as a sign of putting away the evil of the flesh. "Yet," Jesus argues, "you do that on the Sabbath day, thereby violating the Sabbath rest. If you mutilate a little boy on the Sabbath day, is it not better for me to heal a man and make him whole on the Sabbath day?" You can see the power and the force of that argument. There is apparently no response to that reasoning so our Lord closes the dialogue with this warning:

"Do not judge by appearance, but judge with right judgment." {John 7:24 RSV}

That is, do not judge merely by a superficial look at things. Get your values straight. Look at matters from God's point of view. Only then can you make a righteous judgment. There is nothing more applicable to today's world than these closing words of Jesus. How much we need to look at life from God's point of view, to value what he values, then we can get our judgments straight.

This very morning the papers are full of the news of a cancer threat from Duncan Hines muffin mix. The stores are already taking this product off the shelves -- but not because there is really a threat to people's lives. I believe that the manufacturers are perhaps right when they point out that the amount of pesticide that may be involved is so minuscule that it could hardly, if ever, cause cancer in a human being. But that is not enough. People hear that something is threatening them in this regard and immediately there is a panic to avoid it. Unless, of course, it is cigarettes! Everybody knows that cigarettes cause cancer -- it is amply documented but people excuse it, ignore it, put it away from their minds, and there is no panic over that at all -- because we do not see the values of life rightly. "Abort the babies," but "Save the whales," we are told. People can teach witchcraft in our schools but not lead children in prayer. We jail Christian school leaders in Nebraska and turn loose killers in California who promise to kill again. We call adulteries "love affairs." So we deceive ourselves.

The words of Jesus come home to our generation as strongly as they did to his: "Do not judge by appearance, but judge with right judgment."

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for your clear teaching about life. Forgive us for our self-deceits, our falsehoods, our lying to ourselves. Keep us trusting your word, understanding it and seeking to obey it that we might learn what it really says. We ask in your name. Amen.

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